

**REPORT ON 2005 PLAN TO EXTEND DARIEN'S
DEER CONTROL ACTIVITY TO PUBLIC (Selleck's Woods)
AND DARIEN LAND TRUST (Dunlap Woods) TRACTS**

In March of 2005, a requested PLAN, carefully developed with the help of expert bow hunter, Rob Lucas, (plus previous plans from successful Controlled Hunts in Audubon Greenwich, the Town of Greenwich, and Wilton), was presented to The Darien Board of Selectmen. The Darien Deer Management Committee's publicly-announced presentation followed in April. First Selectwoman Evonne Klein asked for comments in a July 7th page-one feature in the Darien Times. (By November she had received only one negative response.)

With perception that the proposed actions were new, experimental, and coming during a municipal election year, The Selectmen's vote was delayed until October 17th. They then forwarded The Plan to the Park & Recreation Commission, and their Public Hearing (pre-announced by the Darien News-Review) took place in Town Hall on November 17th. Misconceptions and liability issues caused major concerns almost ending the process. Of the 40 in attendance, only two people registered against the Plan.

After further delays in gaining desired additional liability coverage, hunter Frank DiScala, Esq. was instrumental in drafting an acceptable "Hold Harmless" document for each hunter to sign. He also helped find the needed insurance provider. Thus final approval from the Town did not come until December 7th. Then, with great effort by the part-time, volunteer team, a partial Hunt began on December 14th. However, another week passed before regular hunting was established. Winter had come and the holidays approached.

After overcoming so many obstacles, just getting the first
public hunt underway may be considered a triumph in itself.

Just prior to the Public Hearing, The Darien Land Trust had voted in favor of allowing deer hunting via an authorized culling program in their adjoining Dunlap Woods (22 acres) subject to the Town's approval of hunting in Selleck's Woods (28 acres). However, the complex issue of liability insurance was not resolved until January-- too late for the current season. Result: The hunting area was reduced from 50 to just 28 acres.

THE HUNT: In spite of it all, in the next two weeks the Selleck's Woods bow hunters took three does. This put them right on target for the original goal of 12 in eight weeks (December 1st-January 31st.) However, on January 4th the Hunt was first suspended, and ended a week later by agreement of all principals involved. Since then, many town residents have expressed disappointment the Hunt was ended early. The answer in short: the Hunt came too late in the season.

With the parks already long over-foraged, and difficult winter deer patterns setting in, unfortunately, the 2 ¼ hour morning hunting schedule was now unchangeable. For comparison, in Greenwich Audubon's 2003 Hunt, bow hunters spent 219 hours in tree stands during the prime November "rut", when deer are moving, but just 27.5 hours in January, 2004. Again, butcher Mark Hiller processed 100 deer in

November, 2005, but only eight in the first three weeks of January. So with winter prospects slim, weather uncertain, and several Selleck's hunters now eager to return to their less-restricted, private land sites, all hunt principals agreed to end the Hunt early.

It was agreed to ignore the first hectic organizational week of hunting, when Rob Lucas scrambled to replace hunters now unavailable, and as an intruder repeatedly disrupted the Hunt. A woman had entered the hunting areas from devious points, setting her Dalmatian loose, always in prime time. Several days passed before Animal Control could apprehend and warn her. No arrows were released that first week.

Over 140 pounds of nutritious deer meat went to Milford's Beth El Shelter and to Darien's Person-to-Person with Rob Lucas donating another 50 lbs. to P-2-P from his private-land hunts. (Many area hunters give generously to Hunters for the Hungry each season, including much by Mark Hiller.)

PUBLICITY: Meanwhile an unforeseen turn surfaced. For eight years up until the Hunt began, the local press had remained fair and informative on deer issues, as private land harvests here soared. On Sunday December 11th, The Stamford Advocate had run a well balanced page-one feature, except for a quote at the end outrageously maligning the bow hunters.

However, while Darien's part-time, volunteer hunt team was intent on getting the entry signs produced and up, notifying neighbors and the media, and collecting notarized documents from hunters-- all by the 14th, the Darien Times' new reporter, Susan Shultz, was devoting a page-one feature to the anti-hunting lobby's emotional comments which espouse the "Kill no animal theme." (The "Kill 'em all" faction at the opposite extreme remained unreported.)

Not until paragraph 18 could the persistent reader find significant support for the Town Plan-- just one of a variety of Darien surveys, all showing very strong support for the town's action. This was findings from the fall, door-to-door survey of 315 residents living near another large Darien woodland tract. It was conducted by 19 volunteer residents, independently organized by Rick Littlefield. The bottom line: *Only 8% of the residents were against culling deer on that tract.*

The feature also ignored widely-available research on heavy damage by over-abundant deer to communities and woodlands reported by scientists and insurance bodies in such publications as Reader's Digest, N.Y. Times, Wall St. Journal, Audubon, and scientific journals. Nor was mention found of deer management activities in nearby towns mentioned in the Plan (copies of which both weeklies had.)

Note: The large, 2-color anti-hunting advertisement ran in both Darien weeklies that same day, Dec. 15th.

Later, a letter to the editor in the Darien Times claimed: "Last Saturday (Dec. 17th) while bow hunters were wreaking havoc...in Selleck's Woods, we found two dead deer on Interstate 95 near Exit 13—close to Selleck's Woods"...it's logical that these deer were chased out of Selleck's Woods by bow hunters." Without checking with authorities, Ms. Shultz reinforced this claim in her article.

All authorities responding so far, including two animal control officers, hunters, and Selleck's Woods officials, agree that the charge is unfounded beyond question of doubt. They agree that frightened deer do not panic; that they run no more than 10 to 100 yards, stop and look back. Further, deer are highly unlikely to escape through a large office park. All the officials are aware that the office park running between the Hunt and I-95 13N is 400 yards long itself. Much too far! To top it off, the hunt leader had

already reported that *no hunters* were hunting that first Saturday morning. As someone observed, dogs (and coyotes) may chase deer, but hunters secluded in tree stands do not.

Indeed, police reports reveal that most deer-vehicle accidents occur during short daylight periods when night falls during “drive time”—and after hunting has ended. Corrective letters to the editors and positive editorials in the Darien Times helped. Still, many post-hunt inquiries indicate the feeling that reporting on the Hunt was biased against the Town’s Hunt. We find little change however, in the broad middle-majorities view that yes, these are appealing animals, but their proliferation must be checked, and culling is the only viable way now.

SUMMARY:

1. After eight years of successful bow hunting on private lands, including golf courses, a town-wide effort has been achieved with both the Town and The Land Trust voting to participate for the first time.
2. The Hunt has increased public awareness of the costly effects over-abundant deer have on public health & safety and prized woodlands.
3. In April, 2005 the Town of Darien hired its first Animal Control Officer, and by yearend was actively recruiting its first Environmental Control Officer.
4. Faced with a difficult winter conditions and hunting in ½ the planned area, volunteer bow hunters were matching their average goal of three deer taken per 2-week period.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That approvals of next season’s plan come much earlier.
2. That official efforts be made to get better reporting of deer killed on state and federal highways.
3. That editors require more facts behind colorful emotional claims. The community’s welfare is concerned.
4. That parks seeking to re-colonize plant life, try wire-fenced enclaves, which still remain open to free habitat of birds and small animals.
5. That neighborhoods consider surveys for Lyme disease, when counting of wary, nocturnal deer proves difficult.
6. That property owners *not* clear wooded back yards of trees for fear of deer ticks bearing Lyme disease. Just reducing nearby ground cover should help a lot, but deer reduction remains the best answer.
7. That volunteer hunters on both private and public lands be commended for their valuable services to the community.

Kent Haydock, Committee Chair on behalf of the 2005 Controlled Hunt.

January 28, 2006